Islam and Democracy: An Obscure Relationship - Fatima Al-Samak

Introduction

Democracy is determined by many different elements: culture, wealth, equalities, education, and some will say religion. Religion as a determinant of democratic development has been extensively studied and many arguments have been presented supporting the claim that religion hinders democracy, while others are less convinced. Since Samule P. Huntington published his book, *Clash of Civilization*, there has been an increased focus on the relationship between Islam and democracy. Huntington argued that the world order in the 20thcentury has shifted into a clash between the West and the East, specifically between the West and Islam.

He argues that this clash is highlighted by Muslim resistance to democratic development and modernity, which he attributes to the nature of the religion of Islam. Although Huntington is supported by many in this claim, he failed in providing a concrete, practical explanation for the lack of democracy in Muslim countries. This essay will first analyze the arguments Huntington makes about Islam and democracy, second, it will discuss debates that oppose his claims, third, it will present empirical data to test his claims, and lastly, the essay will provide alternative explanations for the lack of democracy in the Muslim world.

Defining Democracy

In any discussion concerning democracy it is essential to define the term and set a standard for what constitutes a democratic system. Scholars have not been subtle about their debate over the requirements of democracy, but nevertheless they have found some common ground in the institution of elections. Citizen participation through elections is one of the most important indicators for a democratic system, but it is not sufficient because even authoritarian regimes may hold elections and feign democracy.

Therefore, for this discussion, two important questions must be answered about democracy: First, what constitutes a democratic system? and second, is the concept of democracy dichotomous or graded? In other words, are political systems either democratic or non-democratic, or are they either *more*-democratic or *less* democratic*?*

The answer to the first question is that different scholars and theorists present different criteria for what constitutes a democratic system. In this essay, the focus will be on a procedural, minimalist definition of a democracy which presumes "fully contested elections with full suffrage and the absence of massive fraud, combined with effective guarantees of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association."[1] Giovanni Sartori provides a persuasive answer to the second question.

He argues that "the distinction between democracy and non-democracy should be treated as dichotomous. Hence, the essential initial task is to establish exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories of democracy and non-democracy."[2] According to Sartori, there is a fine line between what is a democratic system and what is not, and that is where the concept of democracy is dichotomous. But he also suggests that once a country is deemed democratic, a graded evaluation of its level of democracy can be applied to it. "Thus, what makes democracy *possible* should not be mixed up with what makes democracy *more democratic*."[3]

Therefore, following Sartori's logic, two procedures must take place when evaluating democratic development in any region around the world: Is that region democratic based on a procedural, minimalist definition of democracy and if it *is*democratic, *how* democratic is it? In this essay, these two procedures will be applied to Muslim countries to evaluate their stance on democracy as well as their level of democracy.

Islam and Democracy

The idea of the coexistence of democracy and Islam has raised controversy among writers and theorists: on the one hand, many present significant empirical evidence to prove that in Muslim countries, democracy is either weak or nonexistent and they use religion to explain this phenomenon. Others suggest that religion cannot be used to explain democratic development, and hence, they attribute the lack of democracy in Muslim countries not to Islam, but to other factors.

Islam Hinders Democratic Development

Many believe that where Islam is present, democracy cannot be. In his paper entitled *Does God Matter, and If So Whose God: Religion and Democratization*, John Anderson writes, "[w]ith regard to Islam it was argued that reliance on a fixed religious text and quasi-legal ordinances, the emphasis on divine sovereignty, and the supposed lack of distinction between the religious and the political realm, all worked against democratic development."[4]

The lack of democracy in Muslim countries is used as evidence to support this claim. Anderson notes that with the exception ofTurkey and Pakistan – very weak 'democracies' -, democracy has generally failed to be entrenched in Muslim countries.[5]

Samuel Huntington is one of several writers who strongly oppose the notion that Islam can be compatible with democracy. In his book *Clash of Civilizations*, he repeatedly asserts that Muslim countries are infertile ground for democratic development and, hence, the "underlying problem for the West is not Islamic

fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power."[6]

This leads Muslims to reject western values, including democracy, which leaves them disadvantaged and controlled by an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, Huntington suggests that the "general failure of liberal democracy to take hold in Muslim societies is a continuing and repeated phenomenon[...]

This failure has its source at least in part in the inhospitable nature of the Islamic culture and society to Western liberal concepts,"[7] resulting in a clash between Islam and the West. Huntington does acknowledge that in the 1970s and 1980s the wave of democratization impacted Muslims societies, but he suggests that the impact was limited.[8] His overall argument concerning Islam and democracy can be summarized in one sentence: "democratic prospects in Muslim republics are bleak."[9]

Huntington is not alone. Another writer who shares this view is Francis Fukuyama who argues that "there does seem to be something about Islam, or at least the fundamentalist version of Islam that have been dominant in recent years, that makes Muslim societies particularly resistant to modernity."[10]

Fares Al-Braizat comments on this and writes, "For Fukuyamamodernity is characterized by institutions like liberal democracy and capitalism[...] Fukuyama uses Islam as a 'yardstick' that offers an easy cultural essentialist explanation to the absence of democracy from most of Muslim countries. In this he converges with other culturalists blaming Islam for whatever goes wrong in a Muslim country."[11]

Both writers believe that Islam is the reason Muslim countries are lacking modernity and democracy, and thus, it is important to test their claims by looking at authentic Islamic doctrine and whether it truly is incompatible with democracy, and second, by analyzing empirical data to uncover Muslim attitudes towards democracy.

Islam Supports Democratic Development

The first problem in Huntington and Fukuyama's theories about 'Islam's undemocratic nature' is that that they both failed to understand the religion. Anderson recounts a significant characteristic of religion that many scholars forget to address. He writes,

For Beetham, the trouble with all such 'negative' hypotheses about religion and democratization is that they [treat] 'religions as monolithic, when their core doctrines are typically subject to a variety of schools of interpretation; and as immutable, when they are notoriously revisionist in the face of changing circumstances and political current.

In a wide ranging essay published in 2001 Alfred Stepan suggested that all religious traditions were multi-vocal, containing organizational and intellectual resources that could be called upon in support of democratic forms of governance[12]

In *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation,* Fred Halliday also points out this problem,

To be drawn into an argument about any necessary incompatibility, or for that matter compatibility, between Islam and democracy is to accept precisely the false premise that there is one true, traditionally established 'Islamic' answer to the question, and that this timeless 'Islam' rules social and political practice. There is no such answer and no such 'Islam.'[13]

Many writers, excluding Huntington and Fukuyama, understand that Islam cannot be referred to as one form. True, the ideal, authentic religion has its own political doctrine, but the Islam that is practiced by Muslims around the world may not necessarily adhere to this authenticity.

For one, Islam has several different sects and different schools of thought within each sect: The *Shiites* differ from *Sunnis*, which differ from *Ismaelis, Sufis, Alawis,* etc... Second, there are significant cultural and geographical differences between Arab and non-Arab, Gulf, non-Gulf Muslims, Middle Eastern, East Asian, or African Muslims: For example, Iranian Muslims practice and implement the teachings of Islam differently from Saudi, Bangladeshi, Iraqi, or Turkish Muslims.

Furthermore, Islam's concept of *Ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, allows Muslim scholars to interpret or reinterpret the Islamic laws[14] (to an extent) and devise new interpretations based on their own reasoning. The outcome is that different scholars within one school of thought or within one sect will come to two different conclusions about the Islamic political tradition. This is why for "many writers there is no such thing as a single Islamic political tradition, and they suggest that within the varying Islamic traditions there were ample intellectual resources for those seeking to promote democratic governance."[15]

John Anderson refers to two writers, John L. Espito and John O. Voll, who point out that "it might well be possible to draw on Islamic traditions that were compatible with the core concern of democracy with participation whilst allowing it to take into account the specific concerns of Muslims for recognition of 'special identities or authentic communities.'"[16] Andersonnotes that these two writers, like others, look at the specific concepts of *shura* (consultation), *Ijma (*consensus), and *ijtihad*(independent reasoning) as "providing some intellectual basis for the development of Muslim democracies."[17] Although all three concepts are important in Islamic jurisprudence and imply a democratic culture within Islam, the most significant and relevant to this discussion is the concept of *shura.*

The literal translation of *shura* is consultation. It appears in the Quran, several times, ordering Muslims to consult one another about their affairs in three spheres of society: The political, the economic, and the social and spiritual. The verse that is relevant to this discussion is in Chapter 42: "And those who answer the call of their Lord and establish worship, and whose affairs are a matter of counsel[...]"[18]

Imam Mohammad Al-Shirazi, a very prominent and distinguished Muslim scholar, writes in his book *Shura in Islam*, "Drawing from this holy verse, *shura* is of two kinds: the first is the Muslim governor's consultation of the Muslims about affairs concerning them, and the second is the consultation among Muslims about how to administer their affairs. Therefore, it is a duty on both of the governor and the governed."[19]

Imam Al-Shirazi recounts democratic values of participation in government and civil society. Democratic governments cannot exist without citizen participation through elections and/or referendums, and each citizen chooses the government, party, or politician that will advance their interests in issues around health care, education, economics, labour, national security, liberal rights, etc... Furthermore, advanced democracies value civil society and its merits.

When citizens socialize, they become more involved in society, triggering citizen participation in society through volunteer work, non-government organizations, lobbying, and activism. This in turn leads to an increase in political participation. The idea is that a few Americans in a bowling ally contribute to America's democracy. Evidently, the concept *shura* or consultation is valued in Islam and democracy alike.

Based on this and other concepts, Islam would be closer to democratic values than Huntington suggests. Looking solely at authentic Islamic doctrine, it is clear that Islam is not only compatible with democracy but is one of its strongest proponents. As Simon Bromley writes, "[b]y various obvious criteria - universalism, scripturalism, spiritual egalitarianism, the extension of full participation in the sacred community, not to one, or some, but to all, and the rational systematization of social life – Islam is, of the three great Western monotheisms, the one closest to modernity' and by implication therefore, the one closest in principle to democracy."[20] Huntington andFukuyama's theories are therefore severely challenged.

Islam and Democracy in Empirical Data

Huntington has argued that "religious tradition does have an impact upon the likely success of democratization efforts,"[21]but empirical testing reveals the contrary. Myunghee Kim recounts the 1995-2001 World Values Survey which found that "Muslims and members from other religions give about the same support for democratic ideals and leadership."[22]

She also conducted her own research to test the plausibility of assuming that religious commitments will have an effect on democratic attitudes. The two variables she uses are "religious commitment" (independent variable) which includes three dimensions – theological orthodoxy, confidence in churches, and religious practice, and support for democracy (independent variable) which means that "[r]espondents approve the democratic system, believing that it is superior to any other form of government."[23] Kim's research found that the first variable has "no or limited effect on democratic support," and although "spiritual values may bring meaning and solidarity to an individual, they appear less important for producing democratic attitudes."[24]

She concludes that: "Given the statistical significance of these findings for Protestants and Muslims, Huntington's assertion about the Muslim rejection of democratic beliefs remains unsupported by the survey data from these twenty countries. Neither religion values nor religious practices deeply shape support for democracy. Instead, other variables such as perceived group threats and political indicators (ideological self-placement and political involvement) wield the greater impact, particularly among industrialized societies."[25]

Anderson also presents data that assert that "up to 40 percent of the world's Muslims live in countries that are more or less democratic – often as minorities."[26] A more generous survey published in John Esposito's book entitled, *Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, suggests that Muslims – ironically even many of the 7% classing themselves as 'radical' – in fact admire the West for its democracy and freedoms. However, they do not want such things imposed on them. 'Muslims want self-determination, but not an American imposed and defined democracy,' [said Esposito.] 'What the majority wants is democracy with religious values.'[27]

Consequently, Muslims themselves do not reject democracy, asHuntington claims, and they believe in and aspire for a political system that is democratic.

As for Fukuyama's notion that Islam is incompatible with modernity, and by implication, to democracy, he is critiqued by Fares Al-Braizat, who a paper entitled "Muslims and Democracy: An empirical critique of Fukuyama's culturalist approach." Al-Braizat's research tested Fukayam's theory by using the latest data available for each country from the World Values Survey to test the correlation of two variables: preference for democracy and religiosity. His preference for democracy variable has three indicators, two of which are "preference for a democratic political system," and "democracy is better than any other form of government."

The results contradict Fukuyama's theory as well asHuntington's. For the first indicator, Al-Braizat found that "[p]redominantly Islamic societies show very high levels of support for a [democratic political system] as a very good way of governing their countries, while simultaneously showing high levels of religiosity."[28] Among the Muslim countries with high support for a democratic political system are Egypt, Iran,Turkey, and Jordan.

As for the second indicator, Al-Braizat observed that "support for democracy (democracy is better than any other form of government) is very high in Islamic societies; with Bangladesh 98%, Jordan 89%, Turkey 88% compared to the UK 78%USA 87%, and Canada 87%."[29] Although the statistics he recounts may seem somewhat exaggerated, the overall presumption is that Muslim societies do not reject democracy, but on the contrary, they endorse it.

Thus, Al-Braizat concludes that the "overall trend in the relationship between religiosity and support for democracy is negative and insignificant. By and large, Islamic societies:Bangladesh, Turkey, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan are not unique in showing high levels of support for democracy simultaneously with high levels of religiosity."[30] He finally writes, "Fukuyama's claim about Islam as resistant to democracy, to put it mildly, is seriously challenged."[31] It is therefore clear that religion cannot be used to explain democratic development because it is irrelevant.

Alternative Explanations

We have found that Islam is compatible with democracy and Muslims attitudes are not only positive towards it, but by and large, Muslims prefer a democratic political system over other systems. And although Huntington and Fukuyama failed in their assumption that Islam hinders democratic development, they correctly pointed out the lack of democracy in the Muslim world. If Islam is not the cause of this democratic deficiency, then what is?

What accounts for Muslim countries' rejection of democracy? And what factors play a significant role in shaping the political traditions of Muslim countries? Scholars have offered many potential explanations to these questions, three of which are negative feelings towards the West, economic development, and authoritarian leadership.

Because Muslim countries' historical experiences have been greatly impacted by the West, Muslims have developed negative feelings towards it. Western imperialism, war, exploitation, and political interference in the Middle East led to an entrenched feeling of distrust, fear, and insecurity. Because democracy is generally thought of as a product of the West, the countries of the Middle East have been reluctant to accept a Western democracy.

Huntington points out that “the West's simultaneous efforts to universalize its values and institutions, to maintain its military and economic superiority, and to intervene in conflicts in the Muslim world generate intense resentment among Muslims.”[32]

As noted previously, Esposito's research found that Muslims do not want a Western imposed democracy and prefer to build their own version of a democratic system which would speak to their issues and concerns rather than to Western interests. In addition, “[Muslims] see Western culture as materialistic, corrupt, decadent, and immoral. They also see it as seductive, and hence stress all the more the need to resist its impact on their way of life.”[33]

These negative images associated with the West, somewhat exaggerated by Huntington, further impact Muslims' acceptance of a Western democratic regime that may overstep their culture or religion through certain liberal rights such as sexual orientation and abortion. Accordingly, democracy itself is accepted by Muslims, but certain Western values associated with democracy are not. Thus, although religion does not hinder democracy in the Muslim world, certain socio-cultural elements in Muslim societies prevent them from unconditionally accepting democracy.

One leading factor to the lack of democracy in the Muslim world is the presence of very powerful and hostile authoritarian regimes. In such cases, although the citizens yearn for democracy, the existing regime rejects democracy to protect its power and interests. Therefore, some will argue that the focus of democratic study should not be on cultural pre-conditions, but rather on key social and political actors.[34]

This is important for the Muslim world which is haunted by authoritarian regimes and dictatorships. “[P]eople in Islamic societies tend to have a propensity towards democracy but what makes it less possible for them to achieve democratic political governance is the nature of the over stated, over blown and over stretched state structure and the heavy-handed authoritarian regimes (in most cases) in power at present.”[35]

Iraq is one of many examples of this phenomenon. For over 35 years, Saddam Hussein ruled with an iron fist and although Iraqis attempted to overthrow Saddam's regime several times, their efforts failed miserably. With the fall of the authoritarian regime in Iraq in 2003, Iraqis embraced democracy and took pride in the change of Iraq's political system. The majority of Iraqis are Muslim but this did not impact their resent of authoritarianism and nor their preference for democracy. This reveals that even today, many Muslims actively seek a democratic political system, but hostile dictators actively seek to silence them.

Conclusion

Huntington and Fukuyama's claim that Islam is incompatible with democracy and modernity is false. As a religion, Islam contains democratic concepts such as *shura*, and *Ijtihad,* while Muslims tend to strongly favor democracy over any other system. Kim's research showed that religion is not a strong determinant of democracy, while Al-Braiza revealed that religious Muslims have very positive attitudes towards democratic systems. Since Islam supports democracy, and Muslims favor it, then Huntington's claim that Islam is resistant to democracy holds no truth. Nevertheless, there is a lack of democratic development in the Muslim world and it is caused by many factors other than religion, two of which are socio-cultural preferences and strong, hostile authoritarian regimes. Democracy has become a need for the majority of Muslim citizens who desire political participation, liberal rights, and accountable government. With an opportunity to build their own democracy, their societies will flourish and the “clash of civilizations” will cease to exist.

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The Holy Quran. Chapter 42, Verse 38.

Notes:

[1]David Collier, Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” World Politics, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Apr., 1997), 6.

[2]David Collier, Robert Adcok, “Democracy and Dichotimies: A Pragmatic Approach to Choices about Concepts,”*Annual Review of Political Science Volume 2*, (1999), 12.

[3]Ibid, 12

[4]John Anderson, “Does God Matter, and If So Whose God? Religion and Democratization,” *Democratization, Vol. 11 No. 4* (2004), 197.

[5]Ibid, 197

[6]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 217.

[7]Ibid, 114

[8]Ibid, 114

[9]Ibid, 193

[10]Fares al-Braizat, “Muslims and Democrac:An empirical critique of Fukuyama’s culturalist approach,” World Values Survey, 2,

http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/upload/5_islamdem_2.pdf

[11]Ibid, 2

[12]Anderson, 201

[13]Fred Haliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confronation*, (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd: 1999), 116

[14]Muslim scholars depend on two sources to derive Islamic laws: The Quran and the traditions and narrations of the Prophet Muhammad.

[15]Anderson, 202.

[16]Anderson, 202.

[17]Anderson, 202.

[18]*The Holy Quran*, Chapter 42, Verse 38.

[19] Imam Mohammad Al-Shirazi, *Shura in Islam,* (Qum, Iran: 1999),http://www.alshirazi.com/compilations/patg/alshora/fehres.htm(accessed April 22, 2010).

[20]Quoted in Anderson, 202.

[21]Anderson, 193.

[22]Myunghee Kim, “Spiritual Values, Religious Practices, and Democratic Attitudes,” *Politics and Religion, 1* (2008), 216.

[23]Ibid, 220.

[24]Ibid, 225

[25]Ibid, 228.

[26]Anderson, 203

[27]Associated Press, “Most Muslims 'desire democracy',” *BBC News*, February 27, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7267100.stm

[28]Al-Braizat, 20

[29]Fares, 16

[30]Fares. 21

[31]Fares, 21

[32]Huntington, 211.

[33]Huntington, 213.

[34]Anderson, 201.

[35]Al-Braizat, 20.